

# Semiotics and Ornamentation in Southwest Nigeria Cultural Spaces and Built-form

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## ABSTRACT

Just as housing has more cultural meaning than a mere shelter, the study area's traditionally orally centred people appreciated architecture, urban design, and the arts in multi-sensory, semiotic ways until the 'culture contact' with the modern language of architecture. Architecture is a functional and cultural semiotic symbolic language that includes ornamentations used to express the culture of its builders before the advent of print media. Semiotics itself, as a language of signs and symbols, is applicable to interpret architecture among other disciplines. This semiotic study argues that traditional Yoruba ornamentation in built-forms serves as a crucial, multi-sensory language encoding cultural values and historical narratives, offering a sustainable model for contemporary architecture in Southwest Nigeria. Saussure's and Pierce's concepts of Semiotics, in line with Eco's concept of semiotics of metaphor, were deployed. This paper systematically reviewed literature and case studies in selected southwest towns with cultural Yoruba built-forms. Semiotic theoretical frameworks of theories of Saussure's dyadic and Pierce's triadic, as well as denotation and connotation deployed to decode. It is concluded that a balanced interpretation of our rich architectural heritage would ensure a sustainable environment.

**Keywords:** Architecture, Culture, Built-form, Spaces, Forms, Semiotics, Southwest.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ornamentation in the built form of southwest Nigeria, as its procurement process went from traditional through vernacular to modern architecture, cannot be said to be any less phenomenal. Ornamentation is the basis of the delight aspect to show cultural and built-form identity, with utility and firmness. Culture, ideology, and global politics are involved such that form does not necessarily follow function, given the use of form to express signs and symbols by semiotics. Ornamentation is importantly used to change function and as a tool for cultural cleansing or alienation from roots, values, as seen in the iconoclast Islamists' pulling down of heritage in Mali. However, beyond mere aesthetics, ornamentation as a global phenomenon has always been significantly political. A good case to look at is the Turkish Hagia Sophia building in Turkey. Aesthetics

uses the senses, mainly visual, to perceive and appreciate beauty, especially in the arts. Aesthetics is also traditionally referred to as the understanding of beauty in its true nature in the arts and the great feeling of high quality shown to stir admiration (Ak, 2013; Strati, 2015; Nia & Atun, 2015; Ferdous, 2013).

In the Southwest Nigeria study area, Yoruba people were traditionally orally centred (Sheryl, 2011). To them, 'the house' termed '*ile*' is of great cultural value and meaning, as put by Rappoport (1969), such that its use is found in most of their world views on one hand. However, on the other hand, Semiotics is both a scientific study of meaning-making and a philosophical way of interpreting messages in artificially and naturally constructed languages (Sargazi 2013). Among many other authors, Bronner (2006) related architecture to the linguistic analogy. Suha (2006) spoke of

vernacular architecture, speaking regional dialect since they consist of buildings peculiar to a particular area. This study will include traditional folk and vernacular architecture, which is, in the perspective of Rapoport (1969), a study of the history of the built form and, in this case, the context of the study area. Scully (1999) and Rapoport (1969) saw the built environment and architecture as complementary parts of a culture that must be split into components and concrete expressions to understand its responsiveness. Essentially, this analysis of the cultural semiotics in the ornamentation of the study area's traditional building terminologies is meant to show the possible existence of architecture as a phenomenon in the past cultural setting. The etymology of some Yoruba adages shows how much and in which ways culture and architecture influence one another. Therefore, it may be appropriate to help appreciate the meaning of traditional built forms and the inherent processes of their interpretations based on the study area's societal codes. "Semiotics is not just a science of signs or sign systems, but it deals with all cultural phenomena as a sign system, identifying culture as communication, which expression – architecture – as a relevant object of analysis". They are used to express truth, religion, morality, and dominant occupations, practices, and day-to-day living, which in this context is the built environment (Aremu 2015; Daramola 2013). There has been a trend and influence of "culture contact", making this study between traditional and vernacular architecture very appropriate. Architecture has always been a medium for representing a point of view since historical thoughts and ideas are part of architectural expressions. These social semantics and semiotic communication models are being used to see traditional architecture and urban design in the study area to understand the relations between communication and architecture.

As an evaluation of the architecture of the study area, it was necessary to see and decide on which of the approaches of the following experts is most appropriate in premising this study. John Ruskin saw ornament as the principal part of the architecture, which this study thus adopted (Chandler, 2015). According to Gawlikowska (2013), similarity in communication, whether verbal and non-verbal, and architecture as a basis for this semiotic architectural study premised on the works of the founders of Semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Architecture from has with traditional myth symbolization, been a medium to represent the point of view since historical thoughts and ideas form part of architectural expressions (Adejumo, 2021; Sinha, 2010). Architecture entails; building design, Interior design, Landscape architecture, and urban design. However, this study examined the traditional spaces, forms and artefacts

as cultural semiotics of southwest Nigeria. This study entailed analysing built-forms to show ornamentation as a part of what makes built-form meaningful and symbolically whole beyond mere decorations. Relevant Yoruba language-built environment term like "*ile oba to jo ewa lo busi*" (a burnt kings palace affords it to be more beautiful) brings out the symbolic essence of built-form beauty. Such terms help understand and appreciate indigenous forms as metaphors to inspire new concepts and designs (Oyewale 2021; Johnson 2021; Ezebiro, 2021).

### Statement of the Research Problem

A great deal of skilfulness and attention to detail that has always lost relevance in the study area has always been essential for ornamentation. This may well express the dearth of ornamentation on most contemporary built-forms. Many appreciable indigenous built forms are being pulled down and replaced with less ornamental symbolic mixed development or shopping complex buildings in peri-urban centres of the study area. (Bronner, Suha (2006), Rappoport, (1969), (2006). These and other changes in lifestyles, perceptions of forms, and the indigenous architectural style's relegation led to relocations, abandonment of traditional built forms, and environmental decay (Ramzy, 2013).

A semiotic of sustainable architecture may be the solution to the present pressure of building places without concern for environmental, cultural, and social impact on buildings and the city. There seem to be a next to none purposed architectural semiotic study on the study area. Architecture is a kind of specific spatial semiotics in that it refers to buildings and how their meanings gain form that appeals to our senses. However, with the advent of drawings, the visual, sensual appreciation in architecture became the order of the day to the detriment of other senses (Boyle, 2011). The modern language of architecture became drawings and perspectives, which computers evolved into 3-dimensional drawings and animation that are nearer visual semiotics yet still lacking better cultural context possible through words. The way to know the cultural meaning of the vernacular architectural forms, spaces, and artefacts was through a link to their sources in the past when it was descriptive words and not drawings used to procure them. Therefore, this research seeks to apply the semiotics of traditional terms of Southwest Nigeria to study the area's vernacular architecture.

### Significance of the Study

This study is applied research in line with the "Advocacy" philosophy of research. As descriptive research, it sought to assert of study area's regional cultural architecture identity. This is against the backdrop of the threat of

global “international style”. This cultural study of built form as vernacular buildings in the context of their whole environment is necessary to preserve our heritage.

## Theoretical Framework

Semiotics is defined by Pierce (1931) and Eco (1976) as a branch of linguistics that is both a theoretical approach to cultural studies and teaches reality as an important system of signs (Aremu 2015). Reference was made to Semiotics and the fact that human beings are meaning-makers through their creation and interpretation of signs. The prime place of culture is in the production and interpretation of signs, classified as icons, indices, and symbols. Ornamentation is iconic primarily, but also indexical and symbolic of the study area’s culture.

## Research Methodology

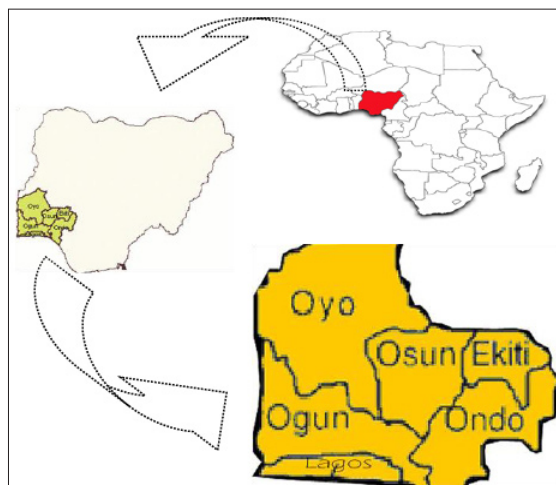
Some Yoruba terms used to describe houses, the built and natural environment were analysed in line with Bernstein’s theory of language. Words are highly coded with extensive applications linking most things about the environment to the house as a social code. The art of its provision is age-old and well internalised—the Data Sources, Collection and Sampling Approach: oral traditions, questions, interviews. The literature review used primary and secondary data from journals, conference papers and proceedings, textbooks, memoirs, and internet sources. Data was collected using

a Survey of traditional words. Purposive and systematic sampling of traditional built-forms and spaces, as natural and built environment forms, spaces, and artefacts, was taken.

## The Study Area: The Southwest Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria

Southwestern Nigeria is home to the Yoruba-speaking people of Nigeria. Legend has it that they descended from Oduduwa, who settled in Ile-Ife, from where they migrated to other places. The study is made up of area six states, namely: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo occupying about 76,852 square kilometres, within longitude 1° 25’ and 6° 45’; latitude 5° 55’ and 9° 10’ N. Majority of Edo, Kwara and Kogi states are also included. (Fajuyigbe & Okunade, 2015; Adejumo, Okedele, Adebamowo, 2012). The people have enjoyed a long history of social, cultural and political organisational cohesion, evident in their house-form (Jiboye & Ogunshakin, 2010) and the ruling chiefs and kings as far back as 600 A.D.

The African West Benue-Congo bit of the Niger-Congo languages; Yoruba is spoken by about 30million Nigerians as done in Togo, Republic of Benin, Ghana, Sudan, Sierra-Leone and Cote D’Ivoire. There are also many Yoruba speaking people in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, and others in the diasporas. (Fabunmi and Salawu 2005)



**Figure 1.** Yoruba Speaking Area in Nigeria

## Built-forms Ornamentation Finishes and Decoration in Southwest Nigeria

The case study areas according to Adeokun, (2013) are located mainly in the geographical region of the hot and humid rain forest. Traditional domestic architecture of these people consists of buildings constructed from locally abundant materials. Functional planning, sizes and rich interior decorations and furnishings (Dmochowski, 1990) and (Osasona, 2007) showed royal palaces (*afins*) being the most impressive buildings in the study area.

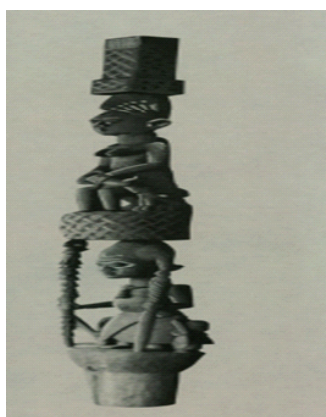
The exterior and interior consisted of walls, posts, beams, lintels, ceiling boards, furnishings, furniture, buildings and artefacts. They were used in traditional altars and other household domestic spaces, mostly ornamentally, to flaunt culture and identity (Jegede, 2021). The wide veranda roofs of Southwest, Nigeria architecture were carried by well-carved wooden posts caryatids often depicting the human body as proof of the people’s artistic traditions and capability (see Plates 6a and b). Most doors, beams and windows of some shrines and religious buildings were crafted and carved by specialised Yoruba ‘*Gbenagbenas*’

(sculptor, carpenter & engineer) such as the late Olowe, who sculpted the door in Plate 1b (Teriba, 2020). The *opo* (posts or caryatids) as seen in Plate 2.2b supporting the verandas and the doors and generally carved in **bas** relief recorded special events like a coronation, wars, sacrifices, hunting expeditions, etc (see plate 2.2). According to Teriba (2020), the door by Olowe in plate 1b had records of the colonial period when it was carved. Just like plate 2.2b also speaks afro-centrally, they beautify and function very well. Sculptured doors are found to date in traditional institutions, even Christian built-forms, despite the widespread belief that built-forms of other heritage sources are more global and better. Houses of ordinary people, who could not afford sculptured posts, had less expensive joinery adopted, or the posts built of mud. According to Jegede (2020), built-forms are site-specific visual arts with not easily changeable permanent influences, unlike sound, which a change of position can avoid. Architecture can be a political art in going a long way to symbolise what peoples and nations stand for. The Hagia Sophia cathedral example mentioned in the introduction had the Christian signs and images replaced without many structural changes to become an equally important mosque globally. Again, the Turkish government changed the building to become an international secular museum through purposed preservation and remodelling (Jegede, 2020; Akintunde, 2020). Interestingly, in the last year, efforts were made again to revert it to a mosque again. Ornamentation in Venturi's doughnut house made the shelter symbolic and functional to show the building of dwellings beyond mere shelter purposes. Though most modernist built-forms

tended more to strict functional machine forms, some great modernists were inspired by traditional African sculptures and totems. The Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife campus example was designed without returning to having huts and sheds (Gitler, 2015; Folaranmi, 2020). A Ghanaian example of effective ornamentation cited by Jegede (2020), but all these are yet like drops in the ocean comparatively. Afrocentric ornaments are relevant if well thought out and integrated into most modernist contemporary built-form designs, however minimal, not as cosmetic afterthoughts (Folaranmi, 2020; Abiola, 2015; Falade, 1990). Elaborate ornamentation is found more in palaces, and royalty built-forms as traditional phrases complementing literature puts it; *ile oba aye yi dara duro wo bi ere* (a palace's beauty is enough to behold like a sculpture).

### Data Presentation

The Yoruba crafted columns '*Opo*' (see plate 1) with the common statement; '*Opomule'ro*', more than for support and aesthetic function to connote strength and support for the structure. The '*Opo*' serves as the column that supports the integrity of the structure just as the man supports the home. In the Osogbo grove, Wenger also saw to the bungalows' high-pitched flying roofs (plate 2a and 2b), alluding to the old Oyo palaces like flying birds' imagery of the *iya eleyes* (flying mothers) Folaranmi (2020) asserted. These high-pitched roofs denoted hierarchy, prestige and high honour in the land and that is why it was initially found in the palaces as seen in the Old Oyo palace as reflected in plate 3a and in 2d, the first palace in Osogbo.



**Plate 1(a).** A post carved pillar (caryatid) at 'idena' (gate) around the Ife palace. Source: Teriba 2020



**Plate 1(b).** A typical palace door carved by a master; Olowe of Ise-Ekiti, is now in a museum.



**Plate 2(a).** Expressions of forms at groove entrance



**Plate 2(b).** caryatids supported the gable-roofed old palace



**Plate 2(c).** *The cement-based sculptured fence*



**Plate 2(d).** *Caryatids supported the old palace hall*

**Plate 1.** *Afro-centric wooden and cement sculptured forms and caryatids*



**Plate 3(a).** *Comparing high slope royal gabled roofs of old Oyo palace*



**Plate 3(b).** *proposed Osun grove amphitheatre fla lean-to- roof*



**Plate 4(a, b).** *The King's Palace, Ile-Oluji courtyard, Caryatids supported old Osogbo palace hall*



**Plates 5(a).** *Ogbomoso old palace carved door, (b)Ilekun-Aisi (Exclusively open-able carved door)*



## Decorative, structural, Interior Elements and other Artifacts

*Ewon, Opo, Eni, Apoti Opo Ile/ Eke* (house posts/Column) are traditional wattle and daub constructions, later earth blocks pier walls. Local sculptors had better finish structural expertise than mere carpenter carved wooden

caryatids found at Owo palaces in *Osogbo* grove. Columns were generally observed as simple wooden or steel posts, especially as was the case in *Igbara-Odo Ekiti*, whereas in other cases, many well-crafted masterpieces had been stolen.

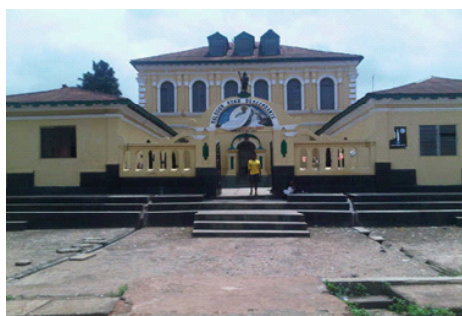


**Plate 6(a).** Masonry column and roof storage tie-beam Igbara  
Odo, Ekiti State, Nigeria



**Plate 6(b).** Carved wooden column and beam also used for  
storage in Owo

**Plate 6(a, b).** variants of well-crafted columns and beams, support, and storage systems



**Plate 7(a).** Front view Balogun Kuku house



**Plate 7(b).** Adjoining Family public mosque (Islamic influence)



**Plate 7(c).** Patriarch & women section opening into fenced  
forecourt (Islamic influence) patriarch's storey building area,



**Plate 7(d).** Family tombs' insignias show members' Islamic or  
Christian leaning as a heritage of unity ,

**Plate 7 (a-d):** Balogun Kuku House



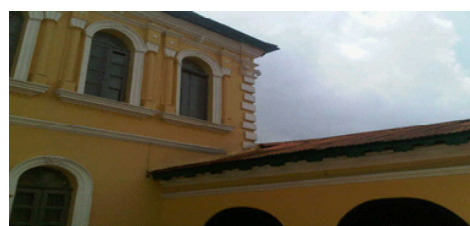
**Plate 8(a).** Joined storey & bungalow building



**Plate 8(b).** Colonnaded Ife palace ile-nla frontage,



**Plate 8(c).** Wooden windows ventilation screen



**Plate 8(d).** Wood-framed glass arched window 'Petesi

**Plate 8 (a,d).** Western-influenced vernacular 'Petesi' and bungalows with openings. Source: Authors' field survey for the plates.

Modernity, progress, and global integration become new connotations as seen in the Balogun Kuku house (Plates 7a-d). Hybrid forms can symbolize cultural resilience and adaptability, which showcases the ability to absorb and transform external influences. Plates 8a-d also reflected ornamentation gaining new meaning as a visible expression of synchronized identities and communal unity in the face of diverse cultural inputs.

### ***The Semiotics of Culture Contact: Ornamentation in Transition***

The encounter between traditional Yoruba architectural practices and external influences, primarily Islamic and Western, has profoundly reshaped the semiotic landscape of ornamentation in Southwest Nigerian built forms. This “culture contact” isn’t merely a stylistic overlay; it represents a complex negotiation of meaning, leading to the emergence of hybrid forms where traditional interpretations may be retained, re-contextualized, or even lost. A critical example is the Shift from Carved Wood to Masonry/Cement. The transition from intricately carved *Opo* (wooden posts) to simpler masonry or steel posts, or even cement-based sculptures (as seen in Plate 1c, “The cement-based sculptured fence”), directly illustrates the impact of new materials and construction techniques introduced through culture contact. It also reflects that while traditional wooden caryatids (like those in Plate 2b) carried rich symbolic narratives depicting historical events, deities, or community values, the simpler, often uncarved, modern posts primarily denote structural support. This suggests a loss of specific narrative and iconographic meaning, as the carved image is often absent. The masonry *opo* might still connote “strength” (as with ‘Opomule’ro’), but without the specific carved details, the deeper, context-specific cultural narratives become less explicit.

### ***Architectural Typology and Ornamentation Changes***

As earlier mentioned, many appreciable indigenous built forms are being pulled down and replaced with less ornamental symbolic mixed development or shopping complex buildings in peri-urban centres. This speaks to a fundamental shift in architectural purpose and aesthetic. The “less ornamental” nature of new structures directly contrasts with the “delight aspect to show cultural and built-form identity” central to traditional ornamentation. This trend indicates a de-emphasis on semiotic richness in public and commercial spaces. Where a traditional palace or compound communicated status, history, and communal values through its intricate carvings and spatial arrangements, modern commercial structures prioritize function and economic utility, often stripping away culturally specific signs in favour of generic “international style” design. The meaning shifts from communal identity and narrative to commercial efficiency and globalized anonymity, a gradual loss of cultural value.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The house, ‘ile’, is essential as a physical and socio-cultural phenomenon to the Yoruba-speaking majority of the study area. This interdisciplinary study has undoubtedly helped to have a more authentic understanding of the inherent meanings in local traditional-vernacular architecture, especially the indigenous source. What primarily obtains in the study area are mostly vernacular built-forms resulting from Islamic and Western influences on the indigenous form. These are still evident as decorative storage support, carved wood, or masonry columns. The interior arrangements in the older indigenous forms and elements are efficiently functional yet symbolic, with inherent rich denotative and connotative meanings. The meanings are apparent by delving into the study area’s mutual contextual belief (MCB) expressions. An observation of deviation from the continued use of some rich indigenous forms, therefore, led to making the following recommendations of this study, to include:

*Develop Heritage Preservation Policies:* This paper advocates for the establishment of local and national policies that specifically recognize and protect traditional Yoruba built-forms and their ornamentation as intangible cultural heritage. This could include legal frameworks for conservation, incentives for owners, and designation of heritage sites. To achieve this, a “Yoruba Architectural Heritage Register” to document and categorize significant traditional structures and their ornamental features could be established, and tax incentives or grants for property owners who commit to maintaining or restoring traditional ornamentation on their buildings could also be awarded.

*Promote Adaptive Reuse with Semiotic Sensitivity:* The adaptive reuse of existing traditional structures should be encouraged, ensuring that any modifications made respect and integrate the original semiotic meanings embedded in their ornamentation and spatial arrangements.

*Integrate Traditional Semiotics into Architectural and Design Curricula:* To preserve the heritage of Yoruba architecture, a call for a fundamental shift in architectural education in Nigeria (and potentially beyond) is now being made to deeply integrate the study of indigenous semiotics and ornamentation. The development of new modules or courses specifically on “Yoruba Architectural Semiotics” or “Indigenous Building Languages” within university architecture, urban planning, and art history departments.

Therefore, educators, built environment professionals, and language experts should research the relationship between indigenous Yoruba words, forms, and spaces in southwest Nigeria. They may be shocked to see that the way forward lies in many missing links being sought for in them.

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